

Voter experience of corrupt officials is an overlooked reason for the electoral success of radical right parties

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*The radical right has had a good few years, with the economic crisis providing fertile ground for a political discourse centred around immigration and economic injustice. **Conrad Ziller** and **Thomas Schübel** share research which shows that one of the key, though overlooked, drivers of the rise of parties like the Finns Party in Finland and the Freedom Party of Austria is voter experience of corruption by officials.*



Research on the electoral success of radical right parties is an established strand in the literature of electoral studies and political science in general. Recent gains of far right and radical right parties in national and European parliament elections have even intensified public and scholarly debates regarding the reasons of their success and which lessons established mainstream parties may draw from it.

Explanatory models have examined a variety of causes related to both the constituency of radical right parties as well as structural factors such as characteristics of the political system and economic conditions. Studies on voters' motivations to cast a ballot for a radical right party however mainly focus individual socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes on immigration issues. More recently, political attitudes related to Europeanization and the European Union became more prominent. This development also mirrors a shift in mobilization strategies of radical right parties which increasingly emphasize a populist "anti-elitism" rather than blatant anti-immigration arguments ([Rooduijn 2015](#); [Werts et al. 2015](#)).

The populist frame of contrasting "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" widely used by the radical right [throughout Europe](#) is also the departure point of our study recently published in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*. Specifically, we are asking whether experience with political corruption makes individuals particularly responsive to the populist rhetoric of the far right. According to the main argument tested, people who have been involved in a situation of bribery in dealing with public officials are expected to lose trust in public officials

and political institutions more generally. In turn, this loss in political trust should then translate into a higher propensity to vote for a radical right party as these parties offer “remedies” for political discontent by promises of restoring the *vox populi* as soon as they form the government.

To empirically investigate this hypothesis, we analyze European Social Survey data covering twelve Western and Eastern European countries. The results support our argument, showing that persons who have been asked to pay a bribe in return for a favor when dealing with public officials indeed express systematically less trust in public officials than those lacking an experience of this kind. The trust-eroding effect is not limited to the specific group of public officials, but extends further to basic political institutions (e.g., the legal system of a country). As expected, citizens distrusting public officials or political institutions are in turn more likely to vote for a radical right party. In this way, experienced political corruption indeed ultimately promotes support for populist radical right parties through eroding citizens’ political trust.

Building upon this individual-level mechanism, our study also examines whether the relationship between corruption experience, political trust and radical right support depends on the specific political context. Indeed, we detect weaker eroding effects of corruption experience on trust in public officials in countries with low institutional quality. Citizens in countries where rule of law is low and impartiality of public officials is less prevalent might simply be more accustomed to abuse of political or bureaucratic power. In addition, we find that radical right parties are particularly able to mobilize support from distrusting voters when in opposition. This lends support to the argument that radical right parties have a harder time to attract disenchanted voters with populist anti-establishment rhetoric once they are themselves part of incumbent governments.

Overall, our findings suggest corruption experience to be an important, yet largely overlooked, source of political distrust and radical right voting. In this way, corrupt officials gamble away important foundations of a functioning and vivid democracy. Similarly, a recent study finds perceptions of corruption to lower voter turnout [across European regions](#). It seems therefore a worthwhile task of future research to further examine political consequences of political corruption.

Still, it needs to be emphasized that voters’ motivations are complex and other attitudinal characteristics are important factors as well. Besides low levels of political trust, anti-immigrant sentiments on the other hand dispose citizens to vote radical right, too. In a world facing a global refugee crisis in 2015, parties of the radical right will very likely try to capitalize on this fact. Nevertheless, the results of our study on the whole imply that politicians and public officials may effectively counteract political disenchantment of citizens and its electoral consequences by keeping their own houses in order concerning standards of transparency and compliance.

The citation for the full study is: Ziller, Conrad and Thomas Schübel. 2015. “‘The Pure People’ versus ‘the Corrupt Elite’? Political Corruption, Political Trust and the Success of Radical Right Parties in Europe” Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties 25 (3): 368-386. This post represents the views of the authors, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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